

Tuesday People

From history to work of fiction

Although she has been writing poetry, short stories and plays since the age of 13, Pat Cowlshaw has only now penned her first book, at the age of 80. Dave Stacey talks to the lady whose fictional work *Dark at Six* is based around her own upbringing in Moira.

The book is about a girl called Ellie, but nobody will be fooled by that. The descriptions of village life in Ellie's childhood are too real to be fiction.

The author, Mrs Pat Cowlshaw, admits that she and Ellie are one, and the village is Moira, where she

was born Pat Hollingsworth at Poplar Avenue. She describes the roadway there in the book as 'rutty' and told me it is just as rutted now as in her childhood — indeed complaints about its condition appear from time to time in the *Mail*.

She laughed when somebody said that the houses in Poplar Avenue were built back to front. She remembers that what really happened was that the road in front of the houses was abandoned, and a back road became important.

A young looking 80, she is keeping herself busy writing, but this is not really a new venture. She has written stories, poems and plays throughout her life, though this is her first book — *Dark at Six* by Pat Cowlshaw, published by EFT (Ever Favourite Tales) of High Street, Woodville. The publishers tell her that the book is already selling well.

Her first serious attempt at writing was at the age of 13 when she won several book prizes in a regular competition in what was then called the *Burton Daily Mail*. Over the years she has written for *Secrets*, the women's magazine published by DC Thompson's and which was full of stories, and for the same house's *Sunday Post* — which is still published but no longer prints stories.

She has written a lot of poetry and had some items published, though she has not yet attempted her own book of poems.

She learned to act with Burton School of Speech and Drama. In the 1970s she took part with fellow members of that organisation in the Derby Festival, where they performed extracts from three plays, and she was awarded a gold medal.

Also in the 1970s she wrote a play for Ashby Dramatic Society called *Ghost of a Murder*, and another for Newhall Dramatic Society called *There's Something in the Works*. Both these three-act plays were publicly performed and well received.

The book tells the story of how her widowed mother brought up a family of four children in the mining village between the wars, years when money was short.

There was Grandma's shop next door, where paraffin was poured into customers' own bottles — dangerously close to the fire which kept the copper going (for the Monday washday or for boiling the Christmas puddings).

Grandfather was a pit winder, operating the cage which took miners into and back from the pit — and he was often away from home sleeping rough as he searched for work.

There are memories of a train journey, and the penny bar of chocolate from the station slot-machine before boarding the steam-driven monster, of Great Aunt Hannah's veil that made her look as if she had black spots all over her face.

There was the black-looking bread and the 'horrid-tasting' saccharines instead of sugar during the First World War. There was the classroom wall decorated with pictures of Little Boy Blue, Humpty Dumpty and Goosey Gander, the headmaster who read the children stories by Charles Dickens, the games (swinging off and snobs and skipping games) in the school playground.

Ellie and her sister had to cross a wide field to pick out coal from the flame-bursting pit-bank before they could go to school — and sometimes still had coal-blackened hands which dirtied their classroom sewing.

Practising hymns for the Sunday school anniversary and Mum at her sewing machine until well past midnight for weeks before-hand making dresses for the three girls and a linen suit for their brother, the springtime Sundays when

the children went round the village singing to collect money for church funds, the books the children received as prizes for good attendance — all these provide a background for Mrs Cowlshaw's readable and often humourously told narrative.

There was the time Mum was fined 1s 6d for coal picking, a lot to find out of her widow's pension of 24s a week. They still needed coal, and thereafter the trips to pick it were made by moonlight.

Pegging rugs, making do with barmy dumpling when there was no suet for spotted dog, silver 'joes' in the Christmas pudding, pea picking to earn money for dancing lessons — these are just some of the stuff of Mrs Cowlshaw's book.

"I started writing down my memories for my family. They accumulated so I decided to put them together in a book," she told me. "I wanted to pay tribute to my mother for one thing because she had such a struggle. Thinking of her still brings tears to my eyes."

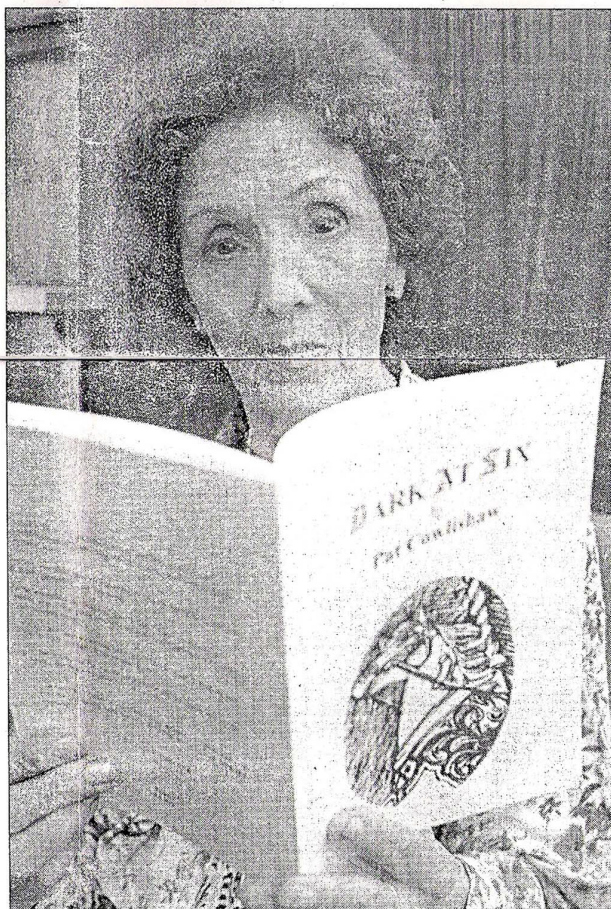
"I hope young people will enjoy reading the book and I think it contributes a little bit to history."

"Today if you're really down on your luck you can get help from the state but in those days you were on your own. You had to economise and devise ways and means of existing, growing your own potatoes and vegetables, picking from the hedgerows to make jam and pies. All this I've described in the book."

"Children had to work for a few pennies pocket money and the household chores had to be shared without any reward. Parents couldn't afford to give their kids pocket money anyway."

"There was no TV and few people could afford a wireless, so children made their own amusements and jolly good fun it was too."

"The background of the book is Moira where we used to play on the lime kilns near the furnace where the museum is now. I think they were started by Earl Moira in 1810, but didn't last long, but we played on the old workings."



• Pat Cowlshaw with her book.

"Now Moira is also at the heart of the National Forest and I thought it a good time to get the book published."

Pat lives at Bretby Court, where her typing through the night kept daughter Nadine awake. Nadine has solved the problem by presenting her with an Amstrad word processor for a birthday present — and it's not so noisy.

However it has inspired Pat to greater efforts and now she wants to start another book. She is delighted with the response to this first one — one person said that reading it made her feel she was one of the family.

Pat has had six children four grandchildren and one

great grandchild and all live locally. Her son Terry, a lecturer in art at De Montfort University, Leicester, has done the drawings for her book.

Pat, whose present home is at Ashby Road East, Stanhope Bretby, is the mother of Chris Cowlshaw (a Burton Albion player to whom I once inadvertently attributed a goal scored by Graham Brown). Chris's son Leigh also played for Burton Albion, but was spotted and went to the US where he played for Richmond University. He still lives over there.

At 17 Pat was a finalist in a Miss Staffordshire competition, in the promotion of which the *Mail* was involved, and in 1935 when she was 21 she was

Coalville's Festival Queen.

Nadine has no interest in writing but her mother's acting experience, and her late father's as a singer, have led her to take part in the productions of the New Opera Company, Derby.

Mr John Cowlshaw, Newhall born, a bricklayer with Boddice's, died in 1986 after 46 years of marriage to Pat. He was a tenor who sang at the Legion Club in Swadincote, with a local concert party called 'The Twerps' (featured some time ago in our feature *The Mail Remembers*), and venues in South Derbyshire and as far away as Nottingham. He left behind some writings — and his wife is seriously thinking that these too could form the basis of an interesting book.

NEWS DIGEST

Card club

Card sharps in Burton and South Derbyshire are being encouraged to show their hand and make up a full house for the Burton Bridge Club.

The club, which meets for duplicate bridge sessions on Mondays and Thursdays at 7pm at the Constitutional Club in High Street, Burton is inviting enthusiasts to come along and join in or just watch.

The sessions cost 70p a night (£1 for non-members) and full membership is £5 a year. For further information contact club chair Mrs Maud Webb on (01283) 812276 or secretary Ian Wyatt on (01283) 536795.

Eyes down

The 8th Burton (St John's) Scouts are holding their monthly bingo on Monday, September 11 at the Parish Room, Rolleston Road, with eyes down at 7.30pm and all proceeds going to the group's equipment fund.

Village grant

Residents were out in force at the weekend sorting up their village after parish councillors won a £1,000 grant.

Hoar Cross Parish Council chairman Councillor Roy Ward said Rural Action had donated the cash to help pay for restoration of a kissing gate, footpath and remembrance garden in the village's Maker Lane.

Coun Ward said: "This is a very important and useful grant because it enables work to be carried out with volunteers at relatively little cost to the parish."

Church appeal

A coffee morning complete with a cake stall is to raise funds for a Burton Church appeal.

All are invited to the event, which will be held at St Paul's Church in St Paul's Square, Burton on Saturday from 10.30am to 11.30am.

All proceeds will go towards the Church Appeal Fund.

Massage talk

Winhill Wives Club will hold its first meeting of the 1995-96 season on Wednesday at St Mark's Church Hall, Church Hill Street, Winhill, starting at 7.30pm.

There will be a talk and demonstration by Mrs J Newing on Shiatsu massage. New members will be welcome.

Exam passes

The following pupils of Robert Sutton Catholic High School, Burton, achieved the following number of GCSE passes at Grade A* in addition to previously published results: J Benstead 1; M Eames 1; I Lomas 1; M Stubbs 2; R Thompson 6.

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